



Transfiguration Sunday, February 11, 2024

Mark 9: 2-9

Glory

Prayer: In the brightness of your presence, we turn our attention to your word, help us to see your face among us. Help us to bear witness to you and not merely to ourselves, help us in this hour to allow the light of your love to illumine our hearts and lives, that we may identify the human face of Jesus more clearly, and walk as your disciples...

What value is a sunset? What is the purpose of its beauty? The purpose is that the sun is setting, the earth is turning, light and darkness move with it. But its beauty? Why -- so beautiful?

We are at the end of Epiphany in the church calendar, which is an easy season to miss if you are not paying attention. This year Epiphany is short – Lent begins next week; Easter is in March. Epiphany is the season which turns our focus to the incarnation of God; in worship we have been paying attention to things in the world: the star of Bethlehem, the infant Jesus, the river Jordan where Jesus was baptized, Samuel’s call in the first Temple – the voice speaking, the calling of the disciples next to the Sea of Galilee, the healing of those who are sick, re-animating their own bodies, stepping back into their lives -- with joy. These are embodied spiritual moments.

Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge said in an interview this month in the *Christian Century*:
 ☪¹ “Epiphany directs us to behold – that’s a revelatory biblical word, behold – the glory of God in Christ as he moves through his time on earth with us, through his death, into his ultimate victory.”

We only see the glory of God in tiny glimpses, if at all. You will need to use your imagination and memory.

The transfiguration is a unique moment in the Bible where we see Jesus for who he is, not while he is out doing something outwardly astonishing, but in a private moment -- while he is praying – he is focused and still. Much of what Jesus does we cannot do, but we can all pray. His disciples get a glimpse of Jesus in the kingdom, and they see him joined by Moses and Elijah. In prayer, Jesus communes with the past and the future. The law, the prophets, and the work of its fulfillment – which is his work on earth. Fulfilling the law and the prophets.

If Jesus had a social reference group outside of his family, this is it – Moses and Elijah. In prayer, Jesus’ appearance changes, he becomes dazzling white,

- the way Moses was described by those who saw him, when he came down from his 40 days on Mount Sinai with God. Moses was so dazzling afterward that people asked him to wear a veil, keep himself covered. It is too much!

¹ Christian Century, February 2024, pp. 75

- Elijah ascended bodily into heaven, like Jesus, and Elijah's disciple, Elisha could not see him anymore. Left squinting in the brightness of the sky.
- It is the kind of dazzling light which blinded Paul on the road to Damascus; reoriented in his own mystical moment – changed from an active persecutor of Christians to the Christian credited most with spreading the gospel outside of Judaism to all nations, in all languages.

Jesus' immediate future is challenging. People are expecting a political assault, and he has come to be a different kind of Messiah altogether. He is about to disappoint a large group of people who are ready to mobilize. Like they did for Judas Maccabaeus, during the Maccabean uprising. Jesus' future is not straightforward. There will be the warmth of friendship; healing of those who are sick, bringing good news to the poor, in addition to betrayal and pain. There will be great sorrow and his task ahead is a mountain in and of itself. For Jesus, it was Moses and Elijah on the mountain in prayer: the law and the prophets, communing with him as he takes up his yoke.

Meanwhile, Peter and the other disciples are not praying at all. Peter seems to be taking in the spectacle, he is ready to act: "Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." As if that will contain a transfiguration. The change that prayer brings is in the heart, and in the mind, in the will, and in our sense of purpose – we are strengthened and sensitized to God's will. It cannot be captured with architecture.

...Any more than you can build an empty building and call it a church. The building is where people meet, the people are the church! The church is always being created among people – in your lives, in your homes, in your families, it goes with you – where you live. It is available for those who stop in for one Sunday, and for those who support it for decades.

Many people begin a spiritual practice in the season of Lent. Many of you chose star words after new year's – this is a spiritual practice, bringing your attention back to your word, what it means in this moment. You could continue that in Lent if you like. To be clear, God loves you just the same whether you begin a spiritual practice or not – the practice is for you, to remind yourself of God's love, God's care for you and for the world, and that God's blessing is available in every situation – although sometimes you need wait to adjust your eyes to see it.

There is an ancient spiritual practice around Beauty, which begins with the assumption that beauty is everywhere, but we are not always ready to notice it. So, we ask ourselves, what is stopping me from seeing beauty? The practice invites us to see beauty, it may mean that some clutter needs to be cleared away, clutter in our minds, preventing us from seeing it, clutter in the real world, (I notice that when things get too cluttered in our kitchen everyone in the family forgets things on their way out the door – too much visual clutter to be able to focus) too much of everything in the way of it. But allowing you to let Beauty have its full effect on your soul, which is restorative, inspiring, delightful, joyous. If we have too many things and too much to do in front of us, we may not notice what is beautiful about any of it. Simplicity is a tool – by paring away excesses, we make an opening for splendor. If we are in a rut, we may not see the beauty around us. If we have a narrow understanding of aesthetics, we are limited in our ability to see beauty in all its manifestations.

Beauty is startling, stimulating, and soothing.

A lot has been written about aesthetics. Gregg Braden talks about this in *Secrets of the Lost Mode of Prayer*: I am paraphrasing:

Beauty is more than things pleasing to our eyes. It is an experience of the heart, mind, and soul. ...To find beauty in each experience, perhaps our role is less about creating it and more about recognizing that it is already here. Beauty is always present in all things. It may be found in places where we believe that beauty could never exist...The power to see beauty is a choice – a practice.

Last week I went to lead a worship service over at Bayview Health Care in Waterford. I was on a floor where people are in long-term care, most of them clear in their minds, but with profound physical challenges which prevent them from returning to independent living. When I asked them about the sunsets there, they all smiled, relaxed, sat straighter in their chairs, it was a common experience of awe which they shared together. An ennobling shared experience. I saw their reverence, and connection. I was in awe; I did not see the sunset; it was mid-morning- but I saw its reflection in their eyes and faces. It is beautiful. They are beautiful.

I apologize to any of you who are colorblind— please picture something else, the night sky, or your favorite waterfall, or tree, or bird, housecat. The practice of beauty also can be recognized in acts of kindness and benevolence.

So, what is this for?

There is a story which was shared by a theologian, a story shared widely by clergy. A couple live together in a house with a detached garage. So, the arrangement is that you walk outside to the garage from the house and back. One day, while he is away, she has motion sensitive lights installed, as agreed. When he comes home, as is his custom, he wanders through the yard on his way to the house. And he asks her why the lights did not come on? She says to him: “you have to stay on the path in order for the lights to come on.”

You must stay on the path for the lights to come on. That is as close to any reason as I can articulate today. On their path, Peter, James, and John saw the light of transfiguration. It was not the end of anything, but it was a beautiful moment in their shared journey of discipleship.

Stay on the path, the sunsets are beautiful, the benevolence is inspiring, the care of souls is worthwhile friends we are being redeemed even now. God loves you. It is beautiful.

Of course, it is just another ordinary gray February day with chores, errands, and problems to solve. Or is it glorious?

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Niantic Community Church

170 Pennsylvania Avenue

Niantic, CT 06357